DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 120 785 CS 202 644

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TITLE Technical Communications: Administrative "Basics" in Community Colleges.
PUB DATE Mar 76
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (27th, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, March 25-27, 1976)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.83 HC-$1.67 Plus Postage
DESCRIPTORS Administrative Policy; *Administrative Problems; Administrator Education; *Business Communication; Community Colleges; *English Instruction; Higher Education; Junior Colleges; *Program Development; Program Planning; *Technical Writing

ABSTRACT

This paper discusses some of the problems and issues related to technical communications programs in the community college. It is divided into six major sections, focusing on such topics as what kind of courses in technical communication are taught and who teaches them, resources for technical writing staffs, the preparation of technical and business communications teachers, the administrative concerns in the development of a career program, the philosophy of a technical communications program, the characteristics of students enrolling in a technical communications program, how administrative development in a technical communications program takes place, and some of the curricular problems which develop between two-year and four-year institutions. (TS)

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TECHNICAL COMMUNICATIONS: ADMINISTRATIVE "BASICS" IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

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Thank you for the opportunity to offer some observations on the status of Technical Communications study in the two-year or community college. I would like to offer some conjectural statements on the future of such endeavors, and bring some word on the problems and issues that attend the development of technical communications programs in the community college. This commentary then, although broad or general may assist in approaching the "Basics" of tech communications in the community college. But before I begin to offer any judgments I think it is necessary (given the representation of four-year and graduate institutions at this meeting) to provide a capsule look at some of the major characteristics (mission, student population served, faculty typology, etc.) of a community college.

I represent a college that professes to be "comprehensive" in its mission to provide educational services to a population of 600,000. Our current enrollments surpass 20,000 students, and we project growth (ground is about to be broken for our branch campus) for at least the next ten years. Educational programs are offered for those students in "transfer" sequences, i.e., bound for senior or receiving institutions, and for "career" sequences, i.e., electing any of 48 one-year or two-year terminal programs. These latter options are often referred to as vocational-technical programs, but this classification no longer does justice to the growing academic character of the programs.

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Technical Communications in a community college means many things, some familiar, some unfamiliar to 4 year college/university representatives. An examination of a number of basic considerations casts more light on the problem of development and the administrative concerns which accrue.

BASIC I

A first basic -- What are the courses? And who teaches them? Courses in Technical Communication in Community Colleges tend to be limited to the two standard and traditional items - Report Writing and Business Writing. These courses typically provide service or support to a wealth of programs in the Engineering, Science, Health Sciences, and Business sectors of the college. They are also often offered as alternative steps or tracks to the usual Freshman English sequence. Some of the larger community colleges have taken this core or base a bit further, and have added component courses to help form out a technical communications program, and such courses as Scientific Writing, Graphics Communication, Publications Management, etc., may well exist.

BASIC 2

A Second Basic -- What about the faculty? Any examination of the English faculty (Business faculty at many 2 year institutions) is revealing particularly in institutions which have experienced rapid growth in the last 10 years. Those faculty who hold tenured positions come from a variety of professional teaching experience backgrounds -- elementary, junior and high school teaching, junior and community college experience, and/or senior college experience. In addition, many recent addi-

tions to community college English departments have arrived fresh from graduate assistantship experience. All of this "mix" spells out not so much a diversity of approach as it does a standard or traditional English teaching stance. The faculty typology factor is important when one considers that the teaching assignments for report and business writing classes necessarily depend on faculty who teach basic English composition classes -- and usually in a traditional manner. As a division chairman of a large number of academic departments I am concerned with providing the best staffing available for the individual courses my institution offers. I pose this problem for you because it constitutes an administrative and instructional "basic" -- the issue of resources for technical writing staffing, and the manner or style in which the instruction develops.

It must also be noted that even in the community college there is the ever-present tendency to give "status" to the literature course, and to deem the "bread and butter" English composition courses as often burdensome and necessary chores. It is often a problematical task in staff development to persuade traditional faculty, trained in a philosophical/literary sphere, to concede that the teaching of technical writing or business writing (most faculty still refer to it as business letter writing) has any merit or status, or can be professionally satisfying. So my assessment of the faculty often called upon to teach technical writing in the community college is that (with a few exceptions) they are "traditional" composition teachers "made over" with a new assignment. Perhaps, and not to lose sight of the purpose of this meeting, the ongoing efforts of the Conference on College Composition and Communication could

give attention to the need for faculty development and professional guidance in this area -- namely the preparation of technical and business communications teachers.

BASIC 3

A third "Basic" concerns the administrative concerns in the development of a career (either one-year or two-year terminal) program. A career program (the parlance owes to the abiding emphasis on the contemporary employment realities for community college programs) is one which may be one-year or two-years in length and one which combines educational and training experiences with an aim toward actual employment upon completion. Such programs don't simply "appear," but are carefully planned by college and community personnel. A local advisory committee of working professionals must be able to identify manpower needs in the projected service area for a five to ten year period before any program can be inaugurated. In the case of developing technical communications at our institution, we discovered large support from a number of large corporations in the 200-square-mile district, but found reticence at state approving agency level. At its present state of development the program is titled Technical Reporting and consists of three course alternatives for a one-year program. Our plans for a two-year degree program must necessarily wait upon an initial year of program success.

BASIC 4

What about the students and the program? Typically, community college students enrolling in technical writing or business writing courses are doing so because they are compiling "English" credits for any of a great number of career

or job-oriented programs. The basic career program in technical communications envisioned at Harper College will build upon the well-established "service" idea, but will also hopefully extend it to other departments within the college to the community at large. Indeed, one of the unique features of Harper's program will be the projected target learning audience. We will be developing a program for people already possessing four-year degrees, but who desire to upgrade their professional potential in their current employment. They are engineers, scientists, and technical personnel in general, and will be (we conceive) markedly different from those other students enrolled at the college. This particular move on our part, i.e. to develop a non-baccalaureate degree which is neither upper-division nor lower-division in the usual sense, manifests still another opportunity for the community college - that of providing mid-career improvement possibilities for area professionals. In very plain words, our action stymies many senior college personnel who fail to understand the community college (they continue to use the term "junior" college) as anything but an institution which provides freshman and sophomore courses for those students hoping to transfer to senior colleges and universities. It is also not commonly understood that community colleges (per se) lay heavy stress on the value of the externship experience in career programs. For example, if a student is enrolled in a two-year program in practical nursing, there is a requirement for on-the-job experience, whether the course is air conditioning and heating, or criminal justice study. My institution looks with high hope to the neighboring corporations which have volunteered assistance in the development of externship experiences.

Perhaps this approach will become one of the basic learning experiences for the technical communication student in the next decade.

BASIC 5

A fifth Basic -- How does "administrative development" take place? The development of a technical communications program usually falls to interested faculty and administrators and occasionally to local advisory personnel who recognize a need in the surrounding community. Several steps have to be taken: 1) A job-potential survey has to be taken in the area. 2) Formal application for a program has to follow prescribed internal and external steps. Internally the program must be seen as part of the goals of the institution and follow the curriculum committee route. Externally, the appropriate state agency or higher board must see fit to grant approval. 3) A coordinator (usually an able faculty member) is proposed and is normally granted released time from teaching. 4) Courses must be reviewed/projected. 5) Periodical evaluations of the program must be planned.

BASIC 6

What kind of relationship exists with senior institutions? Curricular and program basics are heavily influenced by technical communications courses and programs on senior campuses. So one may ask, what are the curricular problems which develop between two-year and four-year institutions? What are some possible solutions? I hold that the relationship between junior and senior institutions has a strong and vital impact on the development of technical communications programs. Those faculty members and administrators from community colleges know only two well

the burden of the game of course review and approval. Two-year institutions simply cannot offer any courses which are deemed upper-division or junior/senior level by the senior institutions. This set of rules is highly criticized by community college English teachers, whose arrival on the community college campus is often a result of contemporary employment reality, and may represent an altered professional goal. Four-year institutions thus exert much influence on the "allowable" English (and technical communications) curricula in the two-year institution. Solutions will no doubt require bending by both parties. Perhaps the role of such associations as the 4C's can be that of a mediator and reconciler in such academic boundary disputes.

In summary, I have tried to present an overview of certain basic characteristics of technical communications development in community colleges, and I have sought to stress a much-needed administrative perspective. I would like to close by considering the way in which the College Conference on Composition and Communication might be able to render developmental assistance to technical communication professionals in the community college. My remarks here might well have struck a number of cooperative chords, but I would specifically call attention to three areas -- 1) Consideration by the Conference of the problems of transfer between institutions, and specifically to deal with issues of upper/lower division significance. This cannot be done without taking a look at course make-up and expectations at all levels, including graduate courses, and also not without giving attention to the type of program I have outlined here. 2) Consideration by the Conference of the ways in which courses could

be encouraged, developed, and monitored in the community colleges, especially through the means of consultants and packets of descriptive as well as prescriptive information. 3) Consideration of the development of a research impulse and a data bank which could be utilized by all institutions. This would also assist in trying to lay out some direction for technical communications as a profession, or where technical writing employment possibilities would be developing.

Thank you.